

Real Fake Fantasies: Design for Tech-Supported Desires

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Introduction

Technology doesn't just allow us to be more efficient. Its use and seamless integration into our lives causes us to desire other experiences, relationships, and abilities. With new technology constantly integrating into our lives, to what extent do we hold onto our same human desires for connectedness? What new desires do we develop? We might find it appealing to surrender decision-making, control, and navigation to forms of technological mediation and find machine-like tasks such as sorting and systemization strangely pleasurable. What new narratives and visualizations will emerge from more technologically saturated and massively networked environments with rules and conditions, which are radically different from our own? If our brains continue to be rewired by technological influence, and memory and cognition become more disembodied, how will we perceive ourselves? *Real Fake Fantasies* explores how these ideas fit into the context of a branded narrative with a series of uncanny encounters and speculative products.

There is a wealth of theoretical writing on the subject of the psychological effect of increased technology use on human perception as well as our relationships to each other and external factors. The overall trend seems to be a conclusion or speculation that personal technology use has the capability to rewire our brains, change the way we perceive our surroundings and how we relate to each other emotionally, and to disrupt (or could potentially in the future) our understanding of reality. My design interest in these subjects lies in what I see as an opportunity for design to make us question our relationships to machines through the speculation and crafting of new narratives of these hybrid lives we may live in the

future. As Dunne and Raby say in *Between the Reality and the Impossible: Revisited*,

What happens when you uncouple design from the marketplace, when, rather than making technology sexy, easy to use, and more consumable, designers use the language of design to pose questions, inspire, and provoke – to transport our imaginations into parallel but possible worlds?

This review pulls together references from technology and information theory, science-fiction, cinema, neurology, and speculative design. My criteria for what to include in the review is based on whether I see the content as informing my core ideas for my project in this stage. The first part of the discussion will look at a series of books and articles that discuss the human-machine relationship. Then I will review a combination of science-fiction and writing about pseudoscience beliefs. Next I will look a few design and projects that deal with similar topics or are exemplary to me because of their structure and method of engagement. Finally, the review will include a body of critical discussion of creative work.

Human-Machine Relationship Theory

The current seminal work in this area as far my research is concerned is *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* by Sherry Turkle. In this book, Turkle is arguing that we shape our tools and they shape us; technology makes us free to work anywhere, but we are more lonely everywhere. She sums up one of the more problematic effects as,

Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing.

This book is indisputably accurate in its assessment of where the internet and other personal technology has put us as a society, but it feels a bit like a sentimental call to action with no real practical solution. We can try use technology less perhaps and teach children the value of in-person contact, but

with technology developing so quickly, it would be difficult to research without being out of date.

Another important text to the discussion of the human-machine relationship is *How we Became Posthuman* by N. Katherine Hayles. She argues that the body will be considered an original prosthesis that we all learn to manipulate, that consciousness does guarantee existence of the self, and the posthuman will achieve consciousness through flickering signifiers, and ultimately how thinking about cyborgs has changed the way we think about ourselves. The most interesting segment in the book is about how information lost its body. It is a provocative statement in that it makes you wonder how the information could get rematerialized into other spaces or objects.

Marina Gorbis of Institute for the Future analyzes the human-machine relationship from a different, more efficiency-related perspective in her article, "Human Plus Machine." She says that,

As machines augment and replace humans in various tasks, their largest impact may be less obvious: their presence among us will change how we see ourselves, forcing us to confront the fundamental question of what we humans are uniquely good at.

Again, this argument points out that the infiltration of machine causes us to reflect about our identities as human beings. Gorbis goes on to identify tasks that are better suited to machines, and what humans bring to the table, which is any task that requires thinking, social and emotional intelligence, or creativity, intuition, and improvisation." She says "machines don't just replace what we do, they change the nature of what we do...our tools change us."

Harry M. Collins adds to the discussion in his article, "Humans, Machines, and the Structure of Knowledge," in which he describes knowledge in terms of whether it is symbol-based, embodied, embrained, or encultured. There are varying degrees in each of these that effect how knowledge might be transferred,

ranging from requiring hardware or simply passing on socially. ([more explanation to come here](#))

Still going to add:

[TED talk by Amber Case \(Cyborg Anthropologist\).](#)

Science-Fiction and Beliefs

Since I intend to work in a speculative design space, I think a grounding in some science-fiction tactics and ideas is important, as well as understanding of why people strange things to be true with no proof. The psychology behind skepticism and belief is interesting in the context of taking science-fiction ideas and applying them to real-world situations. The use of ambiguous details in narratives is something I find useful in design work, and also interesting to read as science-fiction. Ambiguity within future narratives is something explored in a lot of science fiction from George Saunders. Saunders just puts you directly into a world without any setup and it is up to your imagination to put together what exactly Saunders may mean by something like, “I load up my mobil pack. I select my happiest modules,” which is found in *Offloading for Mrs. Schwarz*. The science-fiction writing of Saunders and others, like Matthew Derby and Don Delilo, is often dystopic and provides critical insight into our current society. The way Saunders constructs a world that has either gone wrong or is just disturbing on some level to us because of its different societal rules, constraints, and uses of technology is similar to the type of commentary I wish to engage in through design projects. Science-fiction writing is an undeniable influence, but much of my understanding of narrative construction is grounded in cinema alone.

Michael Shermer’s skeptic text entitled *Why People Believe Weird Things* explains exactly that in terms of pseudoscience, superstition, and “other confusions of our time.” This relates to science-fiction in that the sci-fi authors clearly bank on the fact that people like to believe strange things are possible. His discussion of pseudoscience and pseudo-history is fascinating in that points

out how many things we believe that cannot actually be proven since there is no way of testing them. In my opinion, design practices often act in a pseudoscientific manner, making claims and claiming to use experiments to derive conclusions when they are not using a scientific method or adhering to any scientific guidelines.

Design Projects

Science-fiction product designer Ludwig Zeller explores questions related to some of my own in his project titled *New Needs in an Augmented World*. He addresses the questions of whether information technology rewires our brains and what consequences the “increasing cognitive symbioses between humans and digital systems” will have with a series of objects. The first object, the Dromolux, is a speed-reading trainer that would be used with medication in order to help fight cognitive deterioration. The second object is the Optocoupler, which would serve as a “digital depressant” for relaxing the minds of the members of a future information society using brainwave synchronization. With the third object, the Introspectre, Zeller wonders if we could use sound to understand our inner states better since we will be linked into a global network and have trouble focusing. The Introspectre converts EEG waves into sounds and proposes that it would be used to “compensate for digital restlessness.” While I am not intending to design products, this critical design project is a good example of an approach to dealing with these themes of altered cognition and speculative futures.

The massive urban interactive narrative set in San Francisco, called the Jejune Institute, by artist group Nonchalance, is an alternate reality gaming experience that I consider to be an example of how design can be used to propel a branded narrative. While this project is more interesting because it is not driven by a corporation, there are other examples of corporations doing interesting work in transmedia storytelling and gaming as well. The project consisted of a physical gateway where you are inducted into the experience of solving a mystery by searching for clues throughout the city and the internet. This type of project is

something that I feel brings together a lot of the elements I am interested in thinking about as a designers, and my hope is that the narratives will begin to surface as continue to experiment in the areas of human-machine relationships, desires, and discrepancies. In a blog post called “Welcome to the Multiverse: Creating Hyper-Reality Brands,” Creative Strategist Will Renny states that, “our cityscapes are crammed with windows onto the believable, so much so perhaps that we no longer recognize the idealized vision of the hyper-normal from the normality that encases it.” He is making an argument for new ways brands can engage with audiences, but his thoughts on how fiction and reality can merge are interesting. The following quote sums of these ideas:

Through a blending of our own present, experienced, real-time lives, with a fictional, narrative framework, we can create alternate realities, believable realities, that become participative semi-fictional stories, with varying degrees of immersion or opaqueness.

Still going to add:

An example of a more related project I want mine to be in dialog with it... maybe an augmented reality project by Matsuda or hopefully I find something else.

Critical Discussion of Creative Work, Mainstream Media, and Environments

In the TED Talk: *Consumers’ Quest for Authenticity*, Joseph Pine discusses corporate identity and brand experiences in terms of reality and authenticity. The talk is very business driven, but the part in which he describes the differences between “real real, real fake, fake real, and fake fake” is very interesting. He says that there is no such thing as an inauthentic experience because we are all authentic humans, and there is no such thing as a natural experience because we are using something manufactured in any context that would exist now (there is always mediation). To explain what is meant by “real fake” he uses Universal CityWalk as an example because it “is what it says it is but it true to itself” because you can see behind the façade. In contrast, Disneyland is a “fake real”

because it is not really a magic kingdom, but it is true to itself because the experience is completely immersive. The idea of the real fake is the ideal for a business, but the idea of the real fake is more interesting in a way because it implies that people have to be willing to knowingly suspend their disbelief to be part of the experience.

In the documentary *The Perverts Guide to Cinema*, by Slavoj Zizek, one of the opening lines states, "Cinema is the perfect pervert art. It doesn't give you what you desire. It tells you how to desire." Zizek goes on to describe the relationship we have to cinema in terms of desire and horror. The most interesting part of the commentary is his discussion of what he calls 'partial objects,' which are related to organs without bodies. They are essentially autonomous objects that should not be autonomous, so when they are disembodied they are quite horrific. He gives the example of the scene in *Mulholland Drive* in which a woman is singing on stage and drops to the floor suddenly but the voice uncannily outlives the body and keeps playing. He says "when we are confused for a few seconds afterward, we confront this nightmarish dimension of an autonomous partial object." Another example he gives is the famous Cheshire Cat's smile that remains after he fades away. This serves as a good analogy to my interests in virtual places and relates to Katherine Hayles posthuman argument about how information lost its body. Another interesting point is Zizek's idea that when a "fantasy object enters ordinary reality, the texture of reality is distorted and twisted...this is how desire inscribes itself into reality, by distorting it." When analyzing *The Matrix*, Zizek says that humans are reduced to passive objects with information being sucked out of us and wonders, "Why does the matrix need our energy, or better yet why does the energy need the matrix?" This speaks to the research of Sherry Turkle regarding our need for a virtual supplement. According to Zizek, our libido needs an illusion in order to sustain itself; these id machines are objects that have the ability to materialize our "innermost desires, fantasies, and fears."

Still going to add:

- *Maybe Situated Technologies Pamphlets 3: Situated Advocacy*,
“Suspicious Images, Latent Interfaces” by Benjamin Bratton and Natalie Jeremijenko

- *Maybe: Situated Technologies Pamphlets 6: MicroPublicPlaces*
Spring 2010 by Marc Böhlen and Hans Frei

Conclusion

Summarize the major contributions of significant studies and articles. Evaluate this body of knowledge, pointing out flaws, inconsistencies, and areas or issues pertinent to future study, Provide insight into relationship between central topic and larger area of study (a discipline, scientific endeavor, or profession).

The questions that have surfaced for me from compiling all of these sources will be here.

Bibliography to come